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AUTHOR Poster, John B.
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ABSTRACT

Dynamics in the education policy arena suggest that, despite two generations of researchers extolling democratic leadership styles and consensus building over autocratic techniques, wide participation in policymaking and the broadest possible consensus are not always productive: American society has not yet agreed on what schools should accomplish. In the face of contradictory expectations, many educators feel a loss of efficacy. In addition to lost confidence, there is always the danger of lost jobs in districts where the enrollment continues to fall. To some extent, the question of power sharing and consensus building seems hollow. Sociologists have long noted that people in the human service fields encounter a dichotomy between protecting careers and protecting clients. Superintendents wishing to close schools should reorganize only with a strong board mandate. Consensus is not accountability; if interest groups agree on policies that are unpopular with the body politic, power sharing may be abandoned as participants scatter to avoid public outrage. Consensus advocates must demonstrate how to allocate influence among school professionals and what mechanisms parallel devices in the larger political system. (CJH)

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The Limits of Consensus

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John B. Poster

School of Education

Pace University

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The Limits of Consensus

Introduction

Two generations of researchers have extolled the advantages of democratic leadership over "autocratic" styles in educational decision-making. According to Owens,

> In 1939 Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt, and Ralph White reported a study in the Journal of Social Psychology which has had profound effect on notions of leadership in American education ... This study involved a well-designed study of the reaction of boys to carefully portrayed examples of three leadership styles: democratic, autocratic, and laissez faire ...
>
> The notion of democratic leadership in education was largely developed from these studies.[1]

Although the Lewin, Lippitt, and White study claimed empirical justification for democratic leadership in terms of attitude formation, many subsequent publications posited productive outcomes for such behavior, but did not document the gains. Part of the movement was a reaction to the tradition of the school adminstrator as secular priest, a tradition which did not encourage participant decision-making as noted by Tyack in Managers of Virtue.[2]

In Rensis Likert, New Patterns of Management (New York: McGraw Hill, 1961), Douglas M. Gregor, The Human Side of Enterprise (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960), Fred Hertzberg, The Motivation to Work (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1959), Abraham H. Maslow, Motivation and Personality (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) and T.J. Sergiovanni and F.D. Carver, The New School Executive : A Theory of Administration (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) consensus building through staff and community participation in goal setting

was extolled.

More recent work has related democratic leadership to the effective schools research. In Supervision Human Perspertives, Sergiovanni and Starratt argue that "Human resources leadership tends to be associated with a supportive, goal-oriented climate and high performance, satisfaction, and some innovation."[3] Human resources leadership in this context involves participant decision-making.

Much of the literature equates democratic leadership with development of a consensus. To some extent, this evolution in theory building may be due to the fact that many of the theorists are psychologists or rely on psychological research. For psychologists conflict is destructive and should be avoided or overcome. In political science conflict is viewed more positively. Conflict may be resolved by compromise or allowed to exist as the basis for adversarial systems.

Teacher Unions

Making democratic leadership synonymous with consensus building causes administrative theorists to neglect the role of unions in education. "If only teachers have the expertise required for some decisions," observe Campbell et al, "board members and adminstrators are obligated to find some way of modifying hierarchical control so as to utilize the expertive of the professional."[4] The authors, however, are forced to add the thought that,

> With the increasing power of teachers' organizations, a new force has been brought to bear on the formal bureaucracy. Indeed, it appears that teachers' organizations may do more to solidify certain practices within the organization than the bureaucracy themselves.[5]

Collective bargaining relies upon legal and political science concepts of conflict rather than psychological ones. Democratic leadership in the eyes of the unionized teacher may consist of honoring the spirit as well as the letter of the contract and engaging in honest negotiations at contract renewal periods. Insofar as working conditions become negotiable items, teachers may expand their role in educational decision-making at the expense of middle level managers. Kerchner and Mitchell argue that, "Teacher unionism particularly affected the relationship between teachers and school principals ... many principals began to perceive collective bargaining as a means by which the superintendent controlled them, not the teachers."[6] Kerchner and Mitchell report that one response of principals has been to form administrative unions. Teachers have been able to broaden their participation in decisions affecting working conditions but not through consensus. When faced with diminished authority, principals adopt practices which reassert the school system's hierarchy.

The battle continues as witnessed in "a Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century." This report (1986) of the Forum on Education and the Economy recommends replacement of the hierarchical system of school administration with a collegial model including lead teachers. In "The Revolution That Is Overdue - Looking Toward The Future of Teaching and Learning," the Report of an American Federation of Teachers' Task Force on the Future of Education(1986), the union concludes that

> Teachers should be the instructional leaders of the schools and should be responsible for making

> decisions about instructional strategies, staff development, curricular materials, pupil assignments and scheduling, structure of learning time during the school day, instructional goals beyond those set by the state or local school board, school-level budgetary matters, and elements of professional evaluation. (p. 5)

If Campbell, et al, regard unionization as a force which will solidify the hierachy, the AFT regards collective bargaining as essential for achieving democratic leadership. The power to be shared is drawn from school principals and the district bureaucracy. The relationship is neither collegial nor consensual but contractual.

"The Revolution That Is Overdue ... " argues that teachers should be involved in "elements of professional evaluation", but does not put teachers in the position of disciplining or dismissing other teachers. It states that "... peer assistance and intervention should be used to safeguard standards within the profession." It concludes that "Intensive evaluations of certified teachers should occur only when serious problems are evident." (p. 6) One may ask to whom the serious problems must be evident and who performs the intensive evaluations? Although Albert Shanker has recommended formation of a national Professional Practices Board for teachers, "The Revolution That Is Overdue..." does not mention this entity.

Presumably, school adminstrators would still have to make the most troublesome of decisions-when to seek dismissal of a teacher. Decisions by peers to terminate the employment of a peer can be part of a collegial process as seen by the actions of college faculties. Unions, characteristically, do not expel

their members. Similarly, teacher unions have emphasized seniority when faced with reductions in force. School administrators have been left to devise early retirement plans to maintain job slots for more recently trained teachers. In fact, one study of teachers' satisfaction with school trustees management of decline indicated that the only predictor of teachers' satisfaction was the level of principals' satisfaction.[7] Principals were seen as advocates for their faculties rather than as district adminstrators. It would appear that teachers aspire to decision-making in the areas most familiar to them, pedagogy, curriculum, scheduling, and teaching load, and thus far have shied away from becoming involved in personnel decisions and thereby losing the option to grieve such decisions.

The Principal and Consensus

Principals are aware that leadership is not without risks. In a study of 60 urban, suburban, and parochial high school principals, Jellinek related Weicks concept of tightly and loosely coupled systems to principals' job satisfaction.[8, 9] She discovered that Weicks' model did coincide with the experiences of the incumbents as related in structured interviews. The principals' opportunity to make decisions regarding their schools was not simply a function of bureaucratic rigidity, but was also a matter of protective reaction to potentially troublesome issues. When faced with a damaging decision principals made loosely coupled systems into tightly coupled ones by relinquishing authority over a decision arena to higher authorities in their districts.

Job satisfaction was not influenced by the latitude for

leadership allowed building level administrators, but was affected by salary, opportunities for advancement, and sense of personal fulfillment. Suburban principals spent more time on public relations than did city adminstrators who were more often involved in student disciplinary matters. Parochial school principals usually led smaller schools than did their public counterparts and appreciated the advantages offered by limited size, but complained that the parochial principalship was a dead-end job.

In spite of occasional complaints, the principals in the study expressed a high level of job satisfaction. They did not cite lack of participation in decision-making as a problem. A number of veteran adminstrators commented that they had learned how to manipulate the system to open it or close it as their risks and resources demanded. It is possible that high school principals are less likely to view themselves as instructional leaders than elementary school administrators, and therefore are less threatened by teacher interest in instructional decision-making.

School Closings

Gotti compared the strategies undertaken in two districts which had decided to close schools but which did not know which ones to shutter.[10] In one district a community panel generated several alternatives and delayed making a decision for over a year while rival community groups rallied around the alternative most attractive to each group. To make matters worse, the school board was divided on the wisdom of closing schools and had formed the community panel by a bare majority vote. Principals of vulnerable

schools helped to mobilize faculty and neighborhood support for preservation of their facility.

In the other district the adminstrative staff generated the retrenchment plan which was submitted to the school board. After hearings in which opposition was voiced by parents served by the schools to be closed, the board nonetheless proceeded to implement the staff recommendations. Building principals and teachers were not involved in the process.

The superintendent in the first district was replaced, while the chief school executive in the second district was rehired. In a follow up study of Westchester, New York districts attempting reorganization, the same consequences were discovered.[11] Where competing school closing plans circulated in the district for a considerable length of time, the district either abandoned the retrenchment effort or dismissed the supintendent. Where the board and superintendent controlled the process by not publicizing alternative policies, avoided community task forces or study groups, and condensed the time frame allowed for the decision, schools were closed and the superintendent survived.

The findings of these studies suggest that wide participation in policy making and the emphasis on the broadest obtainable consensus is not always productive. The heart of consensus is compromise, but what concessions can be offered to a neighborhood about to lose its school? The process resembles a zero sum game in which for every winner there is a loser. Zero sum games are not viable arenas for consensus building.[12] Staff morale seems less related to participation in decision making than to the cumulative anxiety

associated with an interminable procedure leading to unforeseen but possibly dire consequences.

In a New Jersey district where three schools out of 11 were closed no administrative or faculty positions were threatened. The complaints from teachers centered on the problems of moving materials from one room to another, changes in grade assignment, and the loss of associates (assigned to a different school) with whom teachers had shared lessons and confidences. The school trustees were criticized for not having taken steps after the 3 schools were closed to reduce the inconvenience involved in reassignment. Interestingly, the district faculty regarded the far reaching decision, which schools to close, as a financial question to be resolved by the school board and the administrators, and the short range decision, how to accomplish the transition in a harmonious manner, as the issue where teacher participation was desireable.

Conclusion

Patterson, et al, make the point that American society has not agreed on what schools are supposed to accomplish. In the face of contradictory expectations many educators feel a loss of efficacy.[13] In addition to lost confidence, there is always the danger of lost jobs in districts where the enrollment continues to fall. To some extent, then, the question of power sharing and consensus building seems hollow. Sociologists have long noted that people in the human service fields encounter a dichotomy between protecting careers and protecting clients. Teachers may wish to exert leadership in areas of school decision-making, but termination of colleagues for cause is not one of

them. As other professionals, teachers perceive any practice, however beneficial to clients, which reduces job security as being potentially threatening. In an uncertain world standards and expectations can change rapidly.

Reductions in force pose the same problem. Relying on seniority allows a faculty to avoid considering individual strengths and weaknesses. In this zero sum game consensus as to who is to be laid off is unlikely. Invoking seniority to establish property rights in employment legitimates a non decision. Conflict is reduced through appeal to a principle, seniority, which in the future may protect those teachers whose positions are jeopardized now.

School closings are another illustration of the limits of consensus Contrary to the tenents of democratic leadership theory, our data suggest that superintendents who wish to close schools and remain in office should

1. undertake reorganization only when they have a strong board of education mandate; in other instances they should create a central staff study group and wait if possible for a firmer commitment;
2. resist creation of citizen committees to designate the schools to be closed and argue for development of a comprehensive plan by their own staffs;
3. caution staff members selected to develop the reorganization plan against leaks to other district professionals;
4. not involve building principals in creating the reorganization plan, particularly if principals are to be reduced in rank;

5. use an outside consulting group, if necessary, but instruct it to produce its plan by a specified and early date and not to make any aspect of its recommendations known until the entire document is accepted by the district;
6. instruct the planning team to present the one best proposal and not a series of alternative recommendations;
7. make the time period from promulgation of the reorganization plan to its implementation as brief as possible consistent with the need to hold public hearings and resolve personnel questions, and
8. disaggregate certain aggregated benefits. For example, if the district has placed all its microcomputers in a magnet school which is not affected by the reorganization, it should consider moving the micros to all the remaining district schools so that students whose previous school was closed will be offered a resource in their new school which was unavailable in the old one.

To some, these recommendations may seem to undo two generations of struggle against educational autocracy, but consensus is not accountability. If all the interest groups in the education community agree on policies which are unpopular with the body politic, will all the participants be held equally culpable or will the school administrators and the school board bear the brunt of public outrage? In democratic theory how can power be shared if responsibility is avoided? Teacher groups have tacitly acknowledged the existence of this problem through their silence on the decision areas cited in this paper. Advocates of leadership

through consensus building have not demonstrated how influence is allocated among the professionals in a school,or what school mechanisms have been created to parallel devices in the larger political system such as issue aggregation; creation of blue ribbon commissions, alternate information sources, specialized committees, and development of a party system to facilitate the processing of demands. Rutter, et al, found that schools improved when teachers felt that their opinions were important to administrators even though the teachers did not participate in policy formulation.[14] The teachers wished to be treated with dignity, but did not wish to become administrators. Until the consequences for action can be linked to the initiators of action, and mechanisims to productively use conflict in a collective bargaining framework can be achieved, school administrators would be wise to consider the limits of consensus.

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